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Britain's King Kong: a history of Nicholas Monro's King Kong

By James Fisher

This essay hopes to demonstrate that the various locations of Nicholas Monro's *King Kong* sculpture are as unusual and noteworthy as the work itself. There are pockets of genuine affection in the areas where the sculpture has been installed, and a small but significant national cultural legacy has been created, as evidenced by the sculpture's occasional mentions within the popular media.

Monro conceived and built the sculpture in his workshop in Hungerford, Berkshire at some point during the six month commission period preceding March 1972.¹ The commission period was stipulated by the Peter Stuyvesant Foundation, by which time Birmingham City Council had already agreed to accept Monro's work. The sculpture was originally entitled *Gorilla*, and although the similarity to the iconic film character King Kong was obviously intentional, it has never officially been known by this name. However, in interviews at the time Monro refers to the sculpture as *King Kong* so we can assume that he had no objections to its unofficial naming.² Although more stylised than its cinematic counterpart, Monro's *King Kong* does bear a similarity to a Danish poster promoting the original film, with the gorilla in the artwork displaying fiery red eyes and a more cartoonish appearance.³

Once completed *Gorilla* made its way to Birmingham by road via Swindon and Bristol on 10 May 1972. That same day, the *Birmingham Evening Mail* reported that the original intention was to transport the sculpture upright, but practicalities meant that it was instead transported on its back on an open-air lorry. Quite sensibly an unnamed spokesman was quoted in the article observing that transporting it upright would have 'provided almost insurmountable problems.'⁴ *The Daily Mirror* detailed that the journey was ahead of schedule and the sculpture had to wait on its back in a lay-by for two hours until the Birmingham traffic had cleared. Once on the road again, a police convoy ushered *King Kong* into his new Birmingham home that evening, reaching Manzoni Gardens at precisely 7.05 pm.⁵

Manzoni Gardens, located directly next to the Bull Ring in Birmingham, had been chosen as the site after negotiations between the council and the Peter Stuyvesant Foundation during the commission period.⁶ The gardens were named after Herbert Manzoni, the controversial City Engineer and Surveyor of Birmingham between 1935 and 1963. Manzoni's vision for Birmingham was one of modernism,⁷ and his sweeping architectural changes and slum clearances left many unhappy about the brushing aside of both the city's history and communal ways of life.⁸ Manzoni's oft-quoted vision for Birmingham centred on a philosophy of questioning 'the value of tangible links with the past, 'noting that 'they are often more sentimental than valuable'⁹. He described Birmingham as having 'little of real worth in our architecture' and set about building a grand vision of a futuristic city replete with new tower blocks, road systems and the redeveloped Bull Ring.¹⁰

Of the many redevelopments taking place during 1960s Birmingham, the Bull Ring shopping centre was one of the most controversial.¹¹ Taking land from surrounding areas traditionally used for outdoor markets, the city's vision was to provide a modern and advanced shopping experience which separated traffic and pedestrians, yet allowed people to park as close as possible to where they needed to be. From a 1960s perspective, when car ownership was still limited, this idea provoked disquiet amongst many Birmingham residents who struggled not only to reach the Bull Ring but who also felt disorientated by the speed of change within the city centre.

It was into this new vision of the future that *King Kong* was delivered on the evening of 10 May 1972. It can be assumed that the erection and securing of the sculpture in Manzoni Gardens occurred either that night or early the next day, as newspaper reports from 11 May already show it being admired by the public *in situ*.¹² The sculpture was positioned on a simple concrete slab on a grass-covered area of the gardens where the giant gorilla was surrounded by both the Bull Ring and another of Birmingham's famous landmarks, the Rotunda. Noticeably, there were no barriers or railings erected to protect the sculpture at this stage, and some of the most famous photographs of the time show children clambering over its base and grinning for the camera. However, at some point, probably because of small acts of vandalism, a waist-high fence was installed.¹³

A number of incidents during the residency of *King Kong* have since passed into Birmingham folklore. For example, on 14 July 1972 two striking builders climbed onto the sculpture's broad shoulders and staged a protest which attracted considerable media attention. Adding to the spectacle were some oversized tools which the builders had placed into the hands of *King Kong*. The demonstration ended peacefully enough, and police efforts to bring the strikers down from the top of a ladder produced a comedic standoff and a resolution which was later described by a senior police spokesman as 'one of the most peaceful and well planned demonstrations held in the city'.¹⁴

As the summer of 1972 progressed, it became clear that Birmingham City Council were growing disinclined to purchase the sculpture. Although it appeared that *King Kong* had produced a mixed reaction amongst Birmingham residents, the Council was largely opposed to the idea of committing funds to secure it, reinforced by Stanley Lapp, the City Council Labour leader, who commented that they would not spend '£1000 or 1000 pence on it'.¹⁵ By July 1972 it became clear that the short stay of Monro's *King Kong* in the city centre was coming to an end - even a local newspaper organised fund-raising event could only generate a single donation of £1 from lollipop lady Nellie Shannon.¹⁶ Barely three months into its residency, the sculpture's future was uncertain.

There has been much speculation about the date and circumstances of the next move for *King Kong*. Most sources quote that the sculpture was in residence at the Bull Ring for six months, as this was the original period of exhibition stipulated by the City Sculpture Project. It is also recorded that the maquette for *King Kong* was displayed in Birmingham City Art Gallery from 16 August 1972.¹⁷ Given this it has previously been assumed that *King Kong* was removed from Manzoni Gardens at some point during October or November 1972.

This assumption does not tally with a filmed interview with the new owner, Mike Shanley, which took place on 18 September 1972.¹⁸ A report for *ATV Today* is filmed with *King Kong* in place at its new location: a second-hand car dealership in Camp Hill, Birmingham.

An excerpt from the interview states:

Interviewer: What made you buy a glass fibre monster like this? Was it an impulse buy or...?'

Mike Shanley: 'Err, well it was because we didn't buy it until seven o'clock last Friday evening, so it's all been done in a bit of a hurry'.

This conversation would place the purchase date at Friday 15 September 1972, with the transportation and installation taking place at some point between the Friday and the Monday of the interview. Another clue also points to this time of year - the trees in the background are still fully covered with green leaves. A *Birmingham Mail* article which dates the sale as September provides further evidence for this.¹⁹

The new location for *King Kong* was possibly even more incongruous than its central Birmingham surroundings: a second-hand car dealership located on a slightly elevated, rather windswept area

flanked by what was the A41 and is now the A4540 Bordesley Middleway, on a stretch of land to the side of Camp Hill's Holy Trinity Church.²⁰ Many locals fondly recall seeing it here.²¹ The purchase price was "almost £3,000" and Shanley obviously thought *King Kong* would be a perfect publicity stunt for his business.²² Soon after purchase Shanley renamed his dealership King Kong Kar Kompany, although the filmed interview states that Shanley was intending to call it King Kong Kars. A popular Christmas caper was for Shanley to dress the sculpture up in a Father Christmas outfit. Each Christmas between 1972 and 1975 *King Kong* could be seen resplendent in an oversized red suit with gold tinsel piping, a gold belt, hat, and white beard and eyebrows. To complete the outfit his right outstretched hand clutched a large golden sack.

It is at this point in the history of the sculpture when rumour and half-truths, fuelled primarily by the internet, became confused with established fact. One persistent rumour that is shared online is that the sculpture was displayed for a short time at Aston University's Gosta Green campus at some point during 1972. Although it is correct that the sculpture was displayed at Gosta Green, this was in fact in the spring or summer of 1975, putting the timeline of the move from Manzoni Gardens to Mike Shanley's business as all taking place in 1972.

The available evidence for the sculpture's brief display at Gosta Green is rather scant but conclusive. A set of three, possibly four, photographs in vivid colour can be found online. These were posted some years ago to a Flickr account²³ and subsequently incorporated into the Wikipedia page detailing the Monro sculpture.²⁴ The photographs show the sculpture being lowered by crane onto a paved brick area, with a backdrop of an office block style building. No plinth had been installed and a crowd of mostly young people are gathered watching. The weather is sunny, and the trees are fully covered with green leaves. This is clearly a different location to where the sculpture had been displayed up to this point, but the persistent naming of Aston University as its location is not entirely correct. In fact, it was students from the Birmingham School of Architecture, part of Birmingham Polytechnic, who arranged this temporary installation. Gosta Green campus housed both Aston University and the School of Architecture, and between the two campuses lay a shared courtyard. It was here that *King Kong* was exhibited at some point during the spring or early summer of 1975.

Mike Menzies, a School of Architecture lecturer at the time, recalls that the fifth and sixth year students arranged for the sculpture to be displayed as part of a symposium called 'Cities of the Future'. *King Kong* was driven from its position at Camp Hill '...across town on his back before being craned into position in the courtyard between the Poly and Aston University. He only remained there for a few days'.²⁵ Menzies recalls the date of display as 'sometime between October 1974 and June 1975', but judging by the weather and the green leaves on the trees in the photographs, it can be assumed to be spring or early summer 1975. It could even be further speculated that a logical date for a student symposium would not be near to the end of a polytechnic term or an exam period, so it could well be April or May 1975 when this took place.

Rather more obscure, but still existing online, are two further pictures of the sculpture's short residency at Gosta Green. The clearest and most conclusive is a picture with technicians from the Mechanical Engineering workshop at Aston University, featured in a *Birmingham Evening Mail* article.²⁶ The photograph depicts six members of staff, four of whom appear to be in fancy dress, posing at the base of the sculpture. A football is in mid-air and there is a general sense of merriment. There is also another photograph which depicts a couple, who could well be students or staff at either Aston or the Polytechnic, smiling in front of the sculpture. The picture is dated 1975 but the only online source appears to be a now-defunct blog.²⁷

Although evidence is scarce, it must be assumed that the sculpture then made its way back to Mike Shanley's Camp Hill car site and remained there for the rest of 1975. By 1976 it had moved to a

second iteration of the King Kong Kar Kompany in the Sparkhill area of the city.²⁸ The new premises were on Ladypool Road, on an open area of land next to The Clifton public house. *King Kong* stood against the end wall of The Clifton welcoming visitors to the outdoor sales area. On the opposite end of the site was a brick built sales area where a large sign displayed King Kong Kar Ko., with the 'K' of each word bearing more than a passing resemblance to the Kellogg's logo.

Whilst at this location, the sculpture was featured in the background of an episode of the BBC TV drama *Gangsters*.²⁹ A short scene takes place around twenty minutes into the programme which begins with close-ups of the sculpture's face intercut with the car lot signage. *King Kong* then appears in the background of most of the scene, and there is even a small cameo role for Mike Shanley himself. An interesting parallel also came out of this unlikely pairing of gritty BBC drama and public sculpture, when interviewed in 2003, the producer of *Gangsters*, Philip Martin, recalled that on the day of green-lighting the programme, the head of commissioning had that afternoon been to see the film *The French Connection*. When his train pulled into Birmingham, with the New York skyline fresh in his mind, he looked out across the city and realised that not many programmes or films had been made in Birmingham.³⁰ Of course this inspiration from New York also influenced Monro's *King Kong*, so the location of a car sales lot in Birmingham may not be as incongruous as first imagined.

It was a brief stay in Ladypool Road as in August 1976 Mike Shanley sold the sculpture to market entrepreneur Nigel Maby for £12,700. After four years in Birmingham, on Wednesday 18 August *King Kong* made a 300-mile trip north to Ingliston Market in West Edinburgh. Sadly, there appears to be no publicly available photographs or written accounts of this journey. Nigel Maby, the owner of an outdoor market management company called Spook Erections, installed the sculpture at the site of a large market area close to Edinburgh Airport, where it stayed for almost thirty years until 2005.

During its time at Ingliston it went through a number of colour changes, being painted both bright pink and tartan.³¹ It was also vandalised a number of times, including in the last few weeks of the market being open.³² In 2004 Nigel Maby died and the ownership and management of Spook Erections passed to his widow Lesley. Occupying a central place in the middle of the bustling market ensured that *King Kong* became as recognised in this location as it had been in Birmingham. The market area eventually closed in 2005 due to expansion plans for Edinburgh Airport which never materialised, but Lesley Maby transported the sculpture to a new market site in Penrith, Cumbria, after a period of two years in storage. Its last day at Ingliston was 3 October 2005.³³ Between October 2005 and October 2007 the sculpture was out of public view for the first time. The last few months in Edinburgh had produced damage to the sculpture's back and arm which needed repairing before it could be displayed again.³⁴ It was transported from storage in Scotland to Penrith on a low loader in summer 2006 and was erected again at Skirsgill Auction Mart, Penrith, in October 2007.³⁵

This was another site which was owned by Spook Erections and as with Ingliston Market, the sculpture proved to be a popular landmark. Lesley Maby succinctly described the appeal of the sculpture 'as a mascot for the market' which also 'became a recognised meeting place as market people would arrange to meet their friends below *King Kong*.' She also added that 'things like this bring humour, and we like the markets to be not just for shopping, but social venues where people meet as we've a lot of regular people coming to our markets. It's just a bit of fun.'³⁶ *King Kong* occupied an elevated position at Skirsgill and experienced another colour change to a vivid white, presumably to ensure maximum visibility.

The sculpture remained in an upright position at Skirsgill until 2011 when it was moved to another part of the site and laid down on its back.³⁷ It remained neglected in this position for around two

years until a change of land ownership necessitated its removal by 2013.³⁸ At this point there was speculation in the Birmingham press that the sculpture could make a return to the city, and various campaigners got involved including Birmingham 'John Bull' character Ray Egan.³⁹ This proposed move did not materialise as Lesley Maby had decided to transport *King Kong* to her own garden on the outskirts of Penrith.

By May 2013, the sculpture was upright in her private garden.⁴⁰ As with its condition post Edinburgh, the sculpture had acquired some damage during its time at Skirsgill. Predominantly still painted white, peeling paint also revealed its other colour incarnations including hints of both pink and black. The whole sculpture also had a mossy green tinge from its time lying down in the car park.

Its new location in Lesley Maby's garden was both majestic and commanding. Looking out over the rolling Cumbrian countryside and flanked by dry stone walls, the sculpture's new home could not have been in greater contrast to the urban environments of its past 40 years. In some ways the sculpture appears out of place denuded of its city environment, but the bucolic landscape of this part of Cumbria does in fact reflect the greenery of Skull Island, King Kong's tropical home in the films, albeit with far less heat and humidity.

After several more colour schemes, including a John Bull ringmaster style outfit and a high gloss black, the sculpture remained in Cumbria until 2016, when it was agreed to be loaned to the Henry Moore Institute in Leeds. Similar to the sculpture's first journey from Hungerford to Birmingham in 1972, the move from a Penrith garden to the Henry Moore Institute gained national attention. On the crisp morning of 14 November 2016, *King Kong* was carefully loaded onto the back of an open lorry. A video crew were there to capture the moment and once the journey was underway sporadic tweets appeared as confused motorists passed its bulk on its journey south. The sculpture reached Leeds that morning, and unlike its arrival in Manzoni Gardens, where it was made to wait for two hours before delivery, this time it was unloaded and installed with minimal fuss.

Although the 'City Sculpture Projects 1972' exhibition did not officially open until the evening of the 23 November, the period between delivery and the official opening elicited much social media buzz.⁴¹ *King Kong* stood tall outside the Henry Moore Institute overlooking The Headrow, one of the main Leeds thoroughfares. On an elevated position, the sculpture stood alongside Leeds Town Hall and Leeds Art Gallery. To the side a short distance away was Leeds City War Memorial, and November 2016 saw a children's fun fair in the space immediately in front of the sculpture. The tableau of giant ape, colourfully decorated children's rides and Christmas lights created a sense of fun that echoed the previous playful motives of Lesley Maby.

Once the 'City Sculpture Projects 1972' exhibition officially opened on the evening of Wednesday 23 November, media coverage about *King Kong* reached a new high. Many native Brummies were surprised to see the legendary sculpture which they had seen as children or heard their parents speak about.⁴² Both the BBC website and Radio 4 covered the exhibition,⁴³ and newspapers in both Leeds and Birmingham published articles.⁴⁴

The 'City Sculpture Projects 1972' exhibition closed on 19 February 2017, although *King Kong* remained in place until the morning of 28 February. The sculpture was transported back to Penrith that day, and by 1 March the Henry Moore Institute Twitter feed announced that the sculpture was back and safely installed in Penrith. This four-month successful sojourn has led many people in Birmingham to request a similar visit from *King Kong*, but for the moment Lesley Maby is happy to see him back surveying the Cumbrian countryside.

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- ³ A high definition version of this poster can be viewed online at https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:King_Kong_1933_Danish_movie_poster.jpg (accessed 12 July 2017).
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- ⁷ J. Webman, *Reviving the Industrial City: The Politics of Urban Renewal in Lyon and Birmingham*, London, Croom Helm, 1982, pp. 14-15.
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- ¹³ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁴ Wood, as at note 1, p. 23. There is also video footage available of the demonstration, shown as part of BBC TV's *Brushing Up on Statues*, first broadcast March 2014.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 22.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 20.
- ¹⁸ Media Archive for Central England, *ATV Today*, 18 September 1972.
- ¹⁹ D. Bentley, 'Christmas in Birmingham used to be VERY different - and THIS is how it's changed over the years', *Birmingham Evening Mail*, 21 December 2016, Edition 1; National Edition <http://www.birminghammail.co.uk/whats-on/shopping/how-christmas-birmingham-has-changed--8310101> (accessed 1 June 2017).
- ²⁰ The A41 road sign is clearly visible on the opening shot of the ATV Today news report.
- ²¹ See <https://birminghamhistory.co.uk/forum/index.php?threads/king-kong-statue.611> for examples (accessed 1 June 2017).
- ²² ATV interview, see note 18.
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- ²⁶ G. Young, 'New statue of King Kong coming to Birmingham for City of Colours Festival', *Birmingham Evening Mail*, 9 June 2016, Edition 1; National Edition <http://www.birminghammail.co.uk/whats-on/whats-on-news/new-statue-king-kong-coming-11441998> (accessed 31 May 2017).
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- ³⁹ J. Griffin, 'Sad plight of King Kong', *Birmingham Evening Mail*, 30 August 2011, p. 3.
- ⁴⁰ As at note 38.
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- ⁴² See the Henry Moore Institute's official video of the installation for one such example: 'Installation of 'King Kong' for City Sculpture Projects 1972 at the Henry Moore Institute', *Vimeo*, <https://vimeo.com/192769603> (accessed 17 July 2017).
- ⁴³ BBC Radio 4, *Front Row*, first broadcast 1 December 2016.
- ⁴⁴ One such example is B. Hurst, 'King of the north: iconic statue of giant ape that once graced city centre now standing outside exhibition in Leeds', *Birmingham Mail*, 16 November 2016, p. 3.